

ALBANIA ELECTION WATCH

Volume 3, June 14, 2013

KEY DEADLINES

June 20: Last day for international observers to submit requests for accreditation to CEC

June 22: End of electoral campaign; Start of 'Electoral Silence'

June 23: Election Day
7:00 – Voting opens
19:00 – Voting closes, end of electoral silence
22:00 – Ballots delivered to counting centers

IN NUMBERS

12 Electoral Districts

140 Mandates

7,149 Candidates (2,729 women)

3,270,936 Voters

89 Commissions of Electoral Administration Zones

5,508 Voting Center Commissions

3,337,388 Ballots



Albania will hold parliamentary elections on June 23, 2013. The National Democratic Institute is analyzing the electoral process through this [series of reports](#), drawing on its [20 years of democratization work in Albania](#), and more specifically on its [March 2013 assessment of the pre-election environment](#), which offered recommendations to enhance the credibility of the election process based on international standards.

The information contained in this report, which covers the period from June 4 to June 14, is based on direct observation of electoral activities, including monitoring of Central Election Commission (CEC) meetings, and interviews conducted with government and party officials, members of Commissions of Electoral Administration Zones (CEAZs), technical experts, and representatives of domestic and international non-governmental organizations throughout Albania.

These parliamentary elections, widely perceived as an important step for further European integration, present an opportunity for Albania to demonstrate its commitment to democratic practices and values. All electoral stakeholders -- including government and opposition parties, election administrators, as well as the voting public -- have a responsibility to ensure that the principles of fairness, peaceful comportment, transparency, and accountability are upheld.

CAMPAIGNING HEATS UP

Campaigning has intensified around the country. Smaller parties and independent candidates, which had not been as visible in previous weeks, have started to hang their own banners and posters in many cities. Promotional materials – flags, posters, billboards, campaign vehicles – particularly for the larger parties overwhelm city streets, often with flags for multiple parties adorning the same lamp post. In major city centers, party members are often seen passing out flyers. Candidates whom NDI met with throughout the country describe intensive door-to-door campaigns, where conversations with voters tend to focus primarily on job creation and the economy. Candidates also discussed plans for launching get-out-the-vote (GOTV) efforts in the final week of the campaign, ensuring party supporters reach the polls on election day.

Campaigning at the local level continues to be calm. For the most part, parties have respected municipalities' rules for distribution of campaign materials in public spaces. Reports of campaign materials being removed or destroyed are limited, and these events appear to be sporadic and random. Party representatives in Kukes and Peshkopi, in Albania's north, called the campaigns calm and peaceful, referring to "educated campaigns" with positive messaging, while those in southern towns of Korca, Gjirokastra, and Vlore described campaigning as "mature" and even "more peaceful than in the past."



Campaign banners for the SP and DP alternate along a city street in Durres.

Violence during the campaigns, as previously reported, has been episodic. In one prominent case, a New Democratic Spirit (NDS) candidate in the central city of Fier was hospitalized after a violent beating on June 9. The NDS condemned the incident and called for a full investigation. The police report from preliminary investigations states the incident was not politically motivated. However, the media reported that the police have taken the brother of the Democratic Party (DP) mayor of Roskovec commune into custody. The Albanian Helsinki Committee, a founding member of the Coalition of Free and Fair Elections, has called on all parties involved in the election campaign to avoid hate speech and personal insults and accusations, which directly or indirectly promote serious criminal acts.

Concerns about vote buying and voter coercion remain high. Vote buying is reportedly so common that candidates in Gjirokastra, Korca, and Vlora, in Albania's south, have recounted being approached in particularly poor, rural areas by citizens asking for material benefit in exchange for their votes. And recently, the media has reported several cases of vote buying, including film of one DP candidate offering money, rice, pasta, flour, and oil in exchange for votes. None of the accused candidates has yet responded to the allegations. The country's People's Advocate (Ombudsman) has established two hotlines for citizens to report cases of electoral abuse, yet the lines have not received any complaints to date. However, the Ombudsman's office is currently investigating three complaints, submitted in writing, concerning coercion of public administration employees. This is viewed as a positive sign since the Ombudsman's office did not receive any complaints in the past election. In its report from June 7, the Coalition of Domestic Observers (CDO) encouraged the CEC and other relevant authorities to examine and resolve in a timely manner any claims of voter coercion or misuse of government resources.



Campaign offices have opened throughout the country, including this one, in a beauty salon in Lezhe, for a woman candidate of the Party for Justice, Integration, and Unity.

CAMPAIGN MEDIA COVERAGE

The election code includes several articles governing the media, including the allocation of free public television time, the regulation of prices for paid advertisement, and the proportion of private news coverage the political parties receive. At issue of late is Article 84 of the code, which provides that

electoral subjects may prepare videos for transmission on private news broadcasts, as long as the electoral subject is clearly identifiable in compliance with CEC instructions. This provision allows parties to provide media with coverage of campaign events when media outlets would otherwise be unable to cover the activities. Such coverage is not considered as a political advertisement.

On June 3, the CEC took a controversial and unclear decision providing instruction to the Media Monitoring Board (MMB), a seven-member body of media professionals that monitors news coverage and political advertisements, on the use of party-produced materials in public and private news broadcasts. The decision does not appear to directly compel television outlets to use party-provided campaign footage in lieu of their own, but could be interpreted to suggest that television outlets can only refuse to air party materials if the footage does not meet technical requirements, and that the MMB should fine media outlets that refuse to air the material. There was ample confusion among media outlets, and even members of the MMB, with whom NDI spoke on this point.

The CEC decision intimates that the ruling had been made in cooperation with the MMB, though in the days following the decision, some members of the Board asserted that there had been no prior consultation and expressed concern that the decision potentially undermines independent journalism. The decision drew sharp criticism from the Union of Albanian Journalists, with its chair, Aleksandër Çipa, demanding that it be revoked in order “to provide the public with unbiased, independent and direct reporting” on electoral campaign activities. On June 11, at the Union’s urging, the Ombudsman’s office recommended that the CEC repeal this decision. The Ombudsman’s recommendation is not legally binding, and the CEC has 30 days to respond, a deadline well after election day.



Campaign cameras sweep over the crowd of an SP election event in Berat.

None of the media representatives with whom NDI spoke demonstrated a strong interest in challenging the ruling by rejecting videos provided by the campaigns. The media appear resigned to this practice, with a few alleging that their attempts to provide independent reporting of campaign activities have been rebuffed by political parties. The media presence at several political rallies that NDI has observed has been low, with few television crews and no print reporters visible. Representatives of the media admit that party-produced images are the staple of daily news coverage, as given the choice between breaking hard news that may risk fines from the CEC for being partisan, and accepting video feeds from the political parties free of charge, television stations choose the latter. The CEC’s decision and

media’s continued use of parties’ video coverage denies the public a critical source of independent and objective campaign coverage.

ELECTRONIC VOTING TECHNOLOGIES

On June 8, the CEC conducted a public test of the Electronic Verification System (EVS) that is planned to be piloted in the district of Tirana. Election observers and members of the media attended this second test of the system, conducted by the CEC. The results of the test met with criticism from both the DP and SP as detailed in the reports both parties submitted to the CEC. These criticized the system for its failure to read damaged or worn identification document (ID) cards. The system did not read five out of 44 (11.3%) ID cards during the test. This result is similar to that of the first test, when the system failed to recognize three out of 35 (8.5%) ID cards. Both reports also criticized the system for not employing

sufficient security measures, leaving the possibility that data from the system could be easily modified or manipulated.

It should be noted that even if the EVS system does not recognize the voter, but the voter's name appears in the hard copy of the voters list for that center and the voter presents a valid ID, the voter will still be allowed to vote.



Media crews and election observers attend the CEC's second test of the EVS system in Tirana.

Given some of the issues encountered at the most recent test of the EVS system, it is uncertain whether the CEC will continue with the project. According to the electoral code the decision whether to continue with the EVS system should have been made thirty days prior to election day. However, the code stipulates that any issue relating to the EVS system is a normative act which needs to be approved by five votes. With the CEC only having four members, it is unclear how the CEC will make this decision. Regardless, the CEC will need to take a decision quickly in order to train voting center staff on EVS procedures and conduct a voter education campaign in Tirana to educate voters about the new system, which the CEC has stated it plans to do.

As mentioned in earlier reports, the utility of the EVS system itself is limited. While the system will prevent a voter from voting twice at the same center, the system is not designed to prevent a voter from voting at another center. Multiple voting can only be checked with the system after the election. While other measures are in place to prevent voters from voting at multiple stations – such as finger inking and a requirement that voters must present a valid ID in addition to being on the voters list for that center – linking the EVS system to the central voters list would provide an additional check against multiple voting.

The electronic counting system (ECS) scheduled to be piloted in Fier is almost certainly not going to be implemented due to technical issues described in NDI's previous [Election Watch Report](#) although a formal decision to suspend the project has not been taken.

The [National Democratic Institute \(NDI\)](#) is a nonprofit, nonpartisan, nongovernmental organization (NGO) that responds to the aspirations of people around the world to live in democratic societies that recognize and promote basic human rights. With funding provided by the United States Agency for International Development and the National Endowment for Democracy, NDI has supported Albania's transition to democracy since 1991, helping to increase the public's participation in decision-making at the local and national levels, organizing and supporting election monitoring and voter education, and fostering the development of political parties and emerging political leaders. NDI works with Albania's major political parties, as well as with domestic nongovernmental organizations and citizens groups, government institutions, and international organizations.

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